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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 ABIDJAN 000600

SIPDIS

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STATE PASS TO PRM/AFR/CACHANG AND AF/W
GENEVA FOR RMA
STATE PASS TO USAID/OFDA/DDEBERNARDO
MONROVIA FOR USAID/OFDA/RQUINBY

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [IV](#) [LI](#) [GU](#)

SUBJECT: THE ROCKY ROAD TO UNHCR'S JUNE 30 RETURN DEADLINE

REF: A. MONROVIA 617

[B](#). STATE 38825

[C](#). FREETOWN 330

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED. NOT FOR INTERNET DISTRIBUTION.

[1](#). (U) Summary: The Abijan-based Refugee Coordinator for West Africa (RefCoord), traveled by road from Monrovia to Abidjan from May 1 to May 17. RefCoord passed through Gbarnga, Voinjama, Macenta, Nzerekore, Danane, Duekoue/Guiglo, and Tabou during the trip. RefCoord visited a number of villages where PRM-funded partners are working and met refugee groups from several camps (Kuankan, Laine, Nicla) and towns (Danane, Tabou) to assess preparations for the conclusion of UNHCR's assisted return program on June 30. More than 97,000 Liberian refugees have returned with UNHCR assistance since November 2004 and UNHCR has communicated a clear message on the June 30 return deadline to Liberian refugee communities RefCoord visited. End Summary.

[2](#). (U) The Abijan-based Refugee Coordinator for West Africa (RefCoord), traveled by road from Monrovia to Abidjan from May 1 to May 17. RefCoord passed through Gbarnga, Voinjama, Macenta, Nzerekore, Danane, Duekoue/Guiglo, and Tabou during the trip. RefCoord visited a number of villages where PRM-funded partners are working and met refugee groups from several camps (Kuankan, Laine, Nicla) and towns (Danane, Tabou) to assess preparations for the conclusion of UNHCR's assisted return program on June 30. This was the first time RefCoord was able to conduct such a trip by road in almost two years. (Note: Please see ref. C for a report on Sierra Leone. End note.)

REFUGEE NUMBERS

[3](#). (U) According to UNHCR's official statistics, UNHCR has assisted 10,930 Liberian refugees to return so far in 2007 (as of April 27). The majority of returning refugees in 2007 are from Sierra Leone (5,796) and Guinea (3,195). Overall, the total number of Liberian refugees who have returned with UNHCR's assistance since November 2004 is now over 97,000. Fifty percent of returnees are from Guinea (48,366), followed by Sierra Leone (23,960), Cote d'Ivoire (18,239), Ghana (5,117), and Nigeria (2,049). UNHCR reports a total of 86,391 Liberian refugees still remain in countries of asylum, with the largest population in Ghana (24,058), followed by Cote d'Ivoire (23,010), Sierra Leone (16,994), Guinea (15,714), and Nigeria (4,825). These numbers continue to decrease, however, particularly from Sierra Leone and Guinea, as organized and spontaneous return movements continue.

(Note: some of the figures on remaining caseload are derived using UNHCR's estimates of "spontaneous" returns. These estimates have not been verified in all cases and may be inaccurate. End note.)

LIBERIA

14. (U) In Liberia, RefCoord visited Bong and Lofa Counties, including the towns and villages of Gbarnga, Foequelleh, Bellemu, Garmue, Gbarnga-Siaquelleh, Gbalatuah, Fissebu, Voinjama, Kolahun, and Foya. David Karp, UNHCR Gbarnga Head of Office, said he was prioritizing remote villages for assistance in the coming year in Bong County. For example, UNHCR will support a school rehabilitation and agricultural development project in Gbarnga-Siaquelleh (Panta District), a village just minutes from the Guinea border. Although overall return numbers to Bong County are relatively low (5,153) when compared to the overall numbers, some 28% of all returns to Bong County have been to villages in this District, and 32% of those returns have come in 2007 alone, the highest percent for any year since 2004. The American Refugee Committee (ARC) is working with a number of villages in this region to establish Savings and Loan Clubs, many of which are already generating significant revenue from club members. In the Zota District, on the road to Lofa County, RefCoord met several school teachers who had worked with the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Guinea, specifically from Laine Camp. RefCoord later read the names of these teachers out to surprised refugees still living in Laine Camp who immediately recognized the names of their friends and former colleagues.

15. (U) UNHCR has assisted more than 57,000 Liberians to

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return to Lofa County. This figure represents 59% of all official return movements. PRM funds several NGOs in upper and lower Lofa County, including ARC, IRC, the Christian Children's Fund (CCF), the International Medical Corps (IMC), and the Center for Victims of Torture (CVT). RefCoord noted significant and continued changes in Lofa County (ref. A). Workers in Voinjama and Kolahun were digging permanent drainage ditches in the town centers, lining them with cement blocks for the first time in years; stacks of fresh lumber were seen lying next to the road, ready to be used in local construction projects; and road crews were putting the finishing touches on the tremendously improved Voinjama to Foya road (travel time has been cut by several hours on this road over the last two years). RefCoord met ARC staff in Voinjama who had returned from refugee camps in Guinea within the last year and almost all of the employees working with CVT are returnees from Sierra Leone and Guinea. In contrast to these positive signs, IRC reported an increase in the number of malnutrition and TB cases at their referral clinic in Kolahun. Most international and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) RefCoord spoke to agreed the health care sector still needed much attention and that access to more remote villages off the main roads is still an area of concern.

GUINEA

16. (SBU) RefCoord crossed into Guinea with UNHCR on May 11 to visit the Kuankan and Laine refugee camps. Soldiers in the town of Macenta, an important crossroads just after entering Guinea from Liberia, had started a protest early that morning over non-payment of salaries and were walking the streets with their weapons. Businesses in Macenta town were closed but some locals continued to go about their daily chores, apparently unconcerned by the occasional, random gunfire from the protesting soldiers. Several soldiers stopped the UNHCR vehicle RefCoord was traveling in, looking for some change "to buy some cigarettes." Local shops in Nzerekore were also closed, ostensibly to prevent soldiers

from looting their goods as had happened in protests earlier that same month.

¶17. (SBU) In the refugee camps, RefCoord met with IRC staff (all Liberian refugees) working in the IRC schools and on IRC's child protection committees. RefCoord was surprised by the frank and open discussions with refugees who admitted that they, and many others in the camps, traveled regularly back and forth to Liberia. They revealed that at least one NGO had recently submitted a list of 67 newly "abandoned" children in the camp that was made up of young men and women over the age of 18. They explained that many of those on the list were in fact former IRC clients who lied to this NGO about their age. They also said the Refugee Committee in Laine Camp had recently submitted the names of three "abandoned" children to UNHCR. The IRC staff said that after some investigation they found the children were actually in the camps with their mothers who had "abandoned" them hoping to obtain additional food rations.

¶18. (SBU) Cesar Ortega, UNHCR Voinjama, traveled with RefCoord to Kuankan Camp. He said that most of the refugees participating in our larger group discussion that morning had only recently been in Voinjama within the last couple of weeks, including the Refugee Committee Chairwoman, as well as many of those he saw receiving food distributions. Although current UNHCR figures report approximately 6,000 Liberian refugees in each of the two remaining camps, Ortega believes the number of legitimate refugees staying in these two camps to be approximately half that number. Salif Kagni, Head of Office for UNHCR Nzerekore, confirmed that recent head counts revealed the numbers are indeed lower than their official figures.

¶19. (U) Some of the refugees RefCoord spoke to said they intended to return after May 24, when the schools closed. Several teachers said they are seriously considering the UNHCR-IRC-Ministry of Education package to add qualified teachers to the Ministry payroll in Liberia, and most refugees still hold out hope the U.S. will offer another group resettlement for Liberian refugees. Other refugees are waiting for their P-3, family reunion cases to be processed, and a large number of Liberians remaining in the camps are physically handicapped and will require closer attention from UNHCR. RefCoord also visited with IRC the villages of

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Simkoly, Kerezaghaye, Loula, and Kermanda, all located outside the two refugee camps. RefCoord and IRC officials were struck by the signs of widespread malnutrition among many children in these villages.

COTE D'IVOIRE

¶10. (SBU) The worst roads during this trip were located between the Guinea/Cote d'Ivoire border and Danane, a town located just north of the former Zone of Confidence (ZOC) in Cote d'Ivoire. The border point on the Ivoirian side is still manned by oddly dressed and young looking Forces Nouvelles (FN) soldiers. The FN provided a security escort that accompanied us on the two hour, fifty kilometer dirt road to Danane and helped wave us through the various FN checkpoints. The road between Man and Duekoue is still monitored by UNOCI forces, although security escorts are no longer provided. A reported up-tick in violence in April around the town of Bangolo, more or less halfway between Man and Duekoue in the former ZOC, forced ONUCI to provide an armed escort for all travelers between these two points for several weeks. However, Auguste Kpognon, Country Director for CARE, said it appears that incidents between Man and Duekoue have actually decreased now that the joint FN and FANCI (regular Ivoirian military) patrols have started as called for under the Ouagadougou Peace Agreement.

¶11. (U) RefCoord met Liberian refugee groups in Danane,

Guiglo, and Tabou. Refugees in Danane and Guiglo asked questions as to why they had not been resettled to the U.S. In Guiglo they were very concerned about the future status of the Nicla refugee camp and what sort of services can be expected after June 30. Questions such as property rights and legal documentation for refugees who remain in Cote d'Ivoire after June 30 were raised several times. In Tabou many of the Liberians on the refugee committee asked specific questions about return assistance, such as how many kilos and what type of goods they could bring with them to Liberia if they returned now. Many of the Liberians in Danane spoke comfortably in French and claimed to have their own small businesses or work in local plantations.

USG MESSAGE ON THE END OF ASSISTED REPATRIATION

¶12. (U) RefCoord talked to refugees and NGO staff in all locations to see how well informed they were of the June 30 deadline and if they understood the status of the U.S. resettlement program for Liberian refugees. Although RefCoord did not see the U.S. statement in all locations (ref. B), it was clear that almost everyone had been well informed that UNHCR's return and reintegration assistance in Liberia will end on June 30 and that the U.S. is only resettling P-3, family reunion cases. Most refugees prefaced their requests for renewed resettlement with statements indicating they are aware of the already expired September 30, 2006, deadline to submit P-3 petitions, and many even asked RefCoord to encourage other countries, such as Canada and Australia, to consider resettling Liberian refugees now that the U.S. program is over.

¶13. (U) In Cote d'Ivoire UNHCR had posted the OPE-provided P-3 lists in all locations RefCoord visited and UNHCR had used the U.S. statement to prepare specific responses to the questions posed on the post-June 30 situation. When asking questions, refugees referred to recent missions from the Ivoirian refugee office, SAARA, on their legal rights in Cote d'Ivoire as well as a recent information mission organized by UNHCR, SAARA, and the Liberian Ambassador to Cote d'Ivoire. Refugees sought clarification of specific points from these missions that revealed their close attention to the different messages each delegation had delivered. RefCoord spoke to one Liberian refugee in Tabou town and asked him if he was aware of the June 30 deadline. He replied that he is going to stay in Cote d'Ivoire after June 30, that he will request his permanent refugee card from UNHCR as explained during a recent information discussion with the Liberian Ambassador, and pointed to his wood shop across the street where he said he plans to continue working.

COMMENT

¶14. (SBU) The areas RefCoord visited on this trip encompass

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the largest concentration of Liberian refugee returnees as well as the largest number of Liberian refugees still officially registered outside Liberia. In Liberia, PRM-funded NGOs and UNHCR are playing a key role in ensuring that return is sustainable. PRM's partners are rightly concerned that the transition from relief to development remains unclear, but the signs of progress and level of refugee repatriation in the last two years is impressive. At the same time, IRC's data on malnutrition in upper Lofa County highlight that real needs are still there. Outside Liberia, at least in Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire, UNHCR has clearly communicated information on the June 30 deadline to all refugee populations RefCoord visited. Refugees have also received information from the USG statement on repatriation and the P-3 family reunion program, either directly from reading the notice or indirectly from friends. The real challenge for UNHCR lies outside Liberia. UNHCR will have to promote local integration in an uneasy political environment

in some host countries. Some refugees still face a long review process for their P-3 petitions and will likely remain outside Liberia during that time. And there is the obvious issue of existing needs within the local, non-refugee communities, whose well-being also needs to be considered. All of these issues will influence UNHCR's programming for the rest of 2007 and into 2008.

HOOKS